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Successor ruins SS-20 as a bargaining chip

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While the world continues to debate Soviet leader Mikhail S. Gorbachev's moratorium on deployment of medium-range SS-20 nuclear missiles, Moscow has moved closer to deploying an entirely new generation of missile, which is more powerful and considerably more accurate than the SS-20, according to Western analysts.

In addition, the Soviets are moving ahead with two new long-range nuclear missiles, one of which is seven times the size of anything in the U.S. arsenal.

These developments have reinforced the belief among Western analysts that the Soviets have offered to freeze a process which is almost already completed.

As a result, the Gorbachev offer is seen in these circles as a "cynical attempt" to lock NATO into an inferior position in Europe.

The analysts say the new Soviet leader is seeking to drive a wedge between the United States and its NATO partners, or at the least hopes to breathe life into the continent's dormant anti-nuclear movement, which is opposed almost exclusively to NATO's response to the Soviet military buildup.

At the center of Western concern is Soviet development of a successor to the vaunted SS-20. The Pentagon last night said it had no name for the new missile.

Little is known about this new weapon, and there is disagreement in U.S. intelligence circles over precisely how far along the road to deployment the it actually is.

The SS-20 is a mobile missile officially classified by the U.S. government as a medium-range ballistic weapon, which means that it has a range of less than 3,417 miles, the ceiling set by the SALT II treaty.

In fact, says one highly placed U.S. intelligence analyst, the SS-20 is something else altogether.

"That missile has been tested on an azimuth directed at the United States, thereby proving its capability as a long-range missile," he said.

"Further, the International Institute for Strategic Studies also disputes the medium-range definition of the SS-20, arguing that the weapon in fact has a range of 7,400 kilometers," or about 4,600 miles.

The intelligence official, who spoke on condition that he not be

identified, said that the "range of the SS-20 can be substantially increased by arming it with two warheads instead of three. That would give it a punch unequalled by anything the West has in its current inventory."

The SS-20 is designed to pack three independently targeted warheads, each with the explosive power of 150 kilotons. In sum, every SS-20 has a kill power equal to about 23 Hiroshima blasts.

"The Gorbachev announcement suggests to me that, having accounted for all of their SS-20s, the Kremlin has decided to try and lock Western Europe and the United States ... into second-class status with what is in effect a political key," the intelligence analyst said.

When asked to elaborate on the Soviet Union's progress with the successor missile, the official declined.

To date, Moscow has deployed 414 SS-20s, of which roughly 276 are aimed at targets in Western Europe. The balance are aimed at China and Japan.

"The Soviets have either deployed all of their SS-20s or are preparing

to. That is why Gorbachev decided now would be the most opportune time to declare a moratorium on further deployments," said another American defense analyst, who also spoke on condition of anonymity.

"He figured that he might as well reap some political hay while he was at it, and what could be a more auspicious timing than the usual anti-nuke demonstrations that inevitably occur around Easter," he said.

Over the past weekend some 300,000 protesters turned out in West Germany in an attempt to turn public opinion away from support of NATO's response to the SS-20s. In England, about 20,000 demonstra-

tors showed up at Molesworth Air Base, about 60 miles north of London, where the next shipment of cruise missiles is expected.

"From Moscow's point of view [Mr. Gorbachev's announcement] was done expertly because the so-called anti-nuclear issue had been effectively killed off by the [West German] Bundestag's vote in November 1983 to proceed with deployment of U.S. Pershings and cruises.

"What better opportunity to breathe new life into a dormant 'movement' than the disposition of the last of your SS-20s?"

Beyond the controversy over the respective advantages each of the superpowers possesses in the European theater, the Soviets also are pressing ahead with their long-range nuclear weapons, whose target is the United States.

Moscow has been moving ahead with deployment of the SS-24 and SS-25 nuclear missiles.

The SS-24 is a modified version of the immense SS-18, a 104-foot, two-stage, solid-propellant missile carrying 10 independently targeted warheads with a total explosive power of 5,000 kilotons.

The SS-18 is seven times the size of the largest and most powerful weapon in the U.S. strategic arsenal, the Minuteman III.

The SS-24's inertial guidance system is designed to be more accurate than the SS-18, and during the weapon's second test flight in November 1983 eight warheads were successfully released.